DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 452 359 CE 081 617

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TITLE Adult Learner Persistence: A Study of Tenacity.
PUB DATE 2001-04-13
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Seattle WA, April 10-14, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Academic Persistence; *Adult Students; Biographical Inventories; *Educational Experience; Educational Research; *Family Influence; Higher Education; Learning Motivation; Self Concept; Student Costs; *Student Motivation; Student Needs

ABSTRACT

A study investigated tenacity of adult students who have once again made their way back to academia. The specific purpose was to discover how these students understood their own history of college enrollment and their perceptions of themselves as persisters. Participants were 63 "tenacious persisters" in three sections of an orientation class at a private, religiously affiliated, southeast college. During an in-class writing assignment, participants were asked to provide an academic history, including names of institutions and dates of attendance. They were also asked to reflect upon their prior college experiences as they answered these two open-ended questions: what was keeping you from achieving your academic goals prior to now? and why are you in college now? Responses were reviewed to identify emergent themes for each question. Responses to the question on why students perceived they had been unsuccessful in past attempts at college were classified into these five dimensions: negative academic experiences, perceived lack of academic skills, lack of purpose and direction, family factors, and financial issues. Responses to the question on why students chose this time in their lives to return to school were classified into these three dimensions: new sense of self-awareness, career and financial issues, and family factors. (Contains 11 references.) (YLB)

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Adult Learner Persistence:

A Study of Tenacity

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CE081617

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Adult Learner Persistence: A Study of Tenacity

College student persistence in higher education has been an extensively studied phenomenon. There are important reasons why this is so. First of all, the benefits of higher education can only accrue to those students who are enrolled in a college or university. Much research points to the fact that social mobility and socioeconomic status are linked to college attendance; intellectual and moral development, cognitive skills, cultural attitudes, political awareness, and personal values and identity, are all positively affected by attending and graduating from college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In addition, from an institutional perspective, the ability of colleges and universities to keep their students enrolled has substantial implications for the prosaic realities of institutional existence: tuition revenue, faculty workload, and budget projections (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1991). At the same time, persistence is often considered an emblem of quality, suggesting to policymakers and donors that the institution deserves continued support (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2000). Finally, student persistence has societal implications, as when women decide not to pursue degrees in math and engineering (Sonnert & Holton, 1995), or when the department of computer science proves less attractive to technically adept undergraduates than a position in the computer industry (Wilson, 1999).

Persistence is a necessary prerequisite for student outcomes, financial solvency, and addressing societal expectations for higher education. If students did not continue to enroll and succeed in higher education, then the institutions themselves could not exist and the role of education in meeting society's demands would be compromised. As important as the concept is, persistence is notoriously difficult to measure. As a variable in research, it has what Clifford Adelman (1999) calls "weak architecture" – in other words, the term "persistence" alone cannot

serve as the foundation for strong conclusions regarding educational outcomes. Its broader meaning is necessarily circumscribed and qualified in research, inevitably misclassifying students in the final assessment.

A recent issue of The Review of Higher Education provides an example. St. John, Hu, Simmons, and Musoba (2001) describe their research on students attending public colleges and universities in Indiana, which suggests that a "merit-aware index" – taking a student's actual Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) score and subtracting their high school's average SAT score – is as effective as absolute SAT scores in predicting student persistence within the first year. While the authors develop an intriguing model that suggests policy implications for admissions processes, they take a narrow view in determining which students persist. St. John and his colleagues consider continuous enrollment within a single state system to reflect student persistence (There is a further suggestion that the student must remain enrolled in the same institution across both semesters, but the authors are unclear on this point). Moreover, they concern themselves only with the spring enrollment of full-time undergraduates following initial matriculation in the fall. Clearly, this study is neglecting students who may have stopped out for a semester or two or enrolled in another institution in another state — students who would likely consider themselves persisters regardless of the definition imposed by the authors.

The point here is not to overanalyze the decisions made by these researchers; it would be inappropriate to condemn unavoidable compromises in studies that make no claim to conclusiveness. As one would expect of competent scholars, the authors are up front about the limitations to their study. St. John and his colleagues (2001) devote a portion of their article to explaining their decision to focus only on within-year persistence, and suggest that other dimensions could profitably be explored in future research (p. 138). The study, however,

conveniently chosen from a recent edition of a major journal, does represent the difficulty that any researcher has in giving conceptual clarity to the term persistence.

It is, of course, quite valuable for an institutional researcher to consider student persistence within a single college or university, and to pursue an analysis that seeks to understand which students remained enrolled through graduation and why. The intent of such a study would nevertheless limit consideration of those students whose enrollment patterns included transfer to another institution, or stopping out for a period of time. As Vincent Tinto (1993) suggests, "Departures are an important part of the process of discovery which marks individual, social, and intellectual maturation" (p. 3). By focusing only on institutional needs, other important outcomes of a more general notion of persistence are ignored.

Adelman (1999) suggests "discarding" the variable of persistence altogether because of its insurmountable flaws. He states:

> Before one accepts a variable simply because it has been used for decades or because a federal agency paid for it, one must examine the bricks and mortar of that variable very carefully. Where the architecture is faulty, the data must be fixed or the variable discarded—or one will never tell a true story. (p. xi).

The true story is that, according to U.S. Department of Education data (Adelman, 1999), over 60 percent of undergraduates have attended more than one college or university during their academic career. These students "swirl" in and out of higher education, returning to the classroom after unsuccessful attempts and false starts at other institutions. In an environment where most students do not maintain continuous enrollment at a single institution from the first fall after their high school graduation, describing student persistence becomes difficult. And yet, while Adelman wants to do away with the notion of persistence entirely (he prefers to use

'completion' as a more defined event with measurable value), the fact that students do actually continue their enrollment across some extended period of time seems too important of an idea to give up. We therefore choose to argue for a reconceptualization of persistence, rather than its demise.

Persistence and Tenacity

Carroll (1989) developed the idea of a "persistence track" to delineate who is likely to earn a degree relatively quickly and who is at-risk of never completing. The traditional persistence track – matriculation in college immediately after high school graduation and earning a bachelor's degree after four years of continuous enrollment – represents the most efficient way for a student to complete his or her undergraduate education. "When students deviate from this track," Carroll (1989) suggests, "they either do not earn a bachelor's degree or their degrees require more time and money" (p. 2). His analysis finds that only 16 percent of students who graduated from high school in 1980 stayed on this persistence track through 1984. More recent research has reached similar conclusions. Levine and Cureton (1998), for example, found that the traditional undergraduate student – 18 to 22 years old, attending full-time at a four-year institution, and living on campus – was a myth. Fewer than one in six college students met this traditional definition, far outnumbered by part-time, commuting adults who juggled academic commitments with work and family obligations.

It may be a truism that a traditional 18-year-old student attending full-time at a four-year residential college is more likely to persist (by whatever definition) than the adult student who works full-time, attends college part-time, and has family and community responsibilities. The majority of undergraduates, however, enroll and re-enroll, overcoming significant barriers while pursuing their educational goals. Theirs may not be a direct path, and it is certainly not the

quickest. When looking at it from students' perspectives, however, they are persisters. These are adult learners who may keep a goal in mind for years – attending part-time when they can, quitting when they get frustrated or when other demands take priority. Eventually, they return for another try. They are tenacious persisters, and every semester brings another opportunity for them again to be learners. Rather than being considered an "at-risk" population (Quinnan, 1997), we should recognize these adult learners as persisters every time they enroll in another college course.

"Institutions may 'retain' students," reminds Adelman (1999), "but it's students who complete degrees, no matter how many institutions they attend. So follow the student, not the institution." In this study, we have our eyes on the student. We look at the phenomenon we call tenacity from the unique perspective of those students who have once again made their way back to academia. Specifically, our purpose was to discover how these students understood their own history of college enrollment, as well as their perceptions of themselves as persisters.

Method

Participants

We chose a private, religiously affiliated college in the southeast United States as the site for our research. The college enrolls approximately 1000 students (the majority of whom are older, part-time, female, and drawn from the local population) and primarily awards associate degrees in the allied health fields (i.e., nursing, radiological technology, surgical technology, physical therapy assisting, emergency medical science, and medical technology). Regardless of previous educational experience, all newly admitted students at the college must enroll in a one-credit orientation course. Students from three sections of this orientation course (N=74) participated in the research project during the spring and summer 2000 semesters.

Procedure

During an in-class writing assignment, participants were asked to provide an academic history, including names of institutions and dates of attendance. Participants were also asked to reflect upon their prior college experiences as they answered two open-ended questions:

- What was keeping you from achieving your academic goals prior to now?
- Why are you in college now?

All responses were in writing and we followed our university's standards for informed consent. All 74 students in the selected courses elected to participate in the study. We defined tenacious persisters as those students who had attended more than one institution and had stopped out for at least one semester after initial postsecondary enrollment. We removed from our analysis 11 students (15 percent) who did not meet this definition.

For the remaining 63 students, we reviewed their responses to identify emergent themes for each research question. Our thematic analysis involved the following steps:

- Reading and rereading responses and organizing data into meaning units consisting of short phrases or sentences
- Categorizing meaning units according to similar elements
- Sorting and resorting elements to form broader dimensions
- Comparing and discussing the data placement into elements and dimensions for each research question
- Production of our final classification system

Results and Discussion

While students included in the study were all classified as first semester students at this two-year college, their ages and academic backgrounds were quite diverse. Of the participants,

approximately 85 percent were female, with ages ranging between 18 and 55 years of age. Seven students had already obtained bachelor's degrees from four-year institutions. The majority of students (70.0 percent) initially enrolled in a four-year institution prior to transferring to this two-year institution. Information related to the number of institutions that each student had attended (including technical, two-year, or four-year institutions) is included in Table One. The total attempted semesters students had enrolled in a technical, two-year, or four-year institution is described in Table Two. The time period between students' last enrollment and current enrollment is described in Table Three. Students in the sample began their initial attempts at college between the years of 1973 and 1999; information related to initial enrollment patterns is included in Table Four.

Analyses of writing samples yielded two broad categories of findings, one category related to research question one, and the other category related to research question two. Under Category One (why students perceived they had been unsuccessful in past attempts at college), responses were classified into one of five dimensions: (1) negative academic experiences, (2) perceived lack of academic skills, (3) a lack of purpose and direction, (4) family factors, and (5) financial issues. For Category Two (why students chose this time in their lives to return to school), responses were classified into one of three dimensions: (1) a new sense of self-awareness, (2) career and financial issues, and (3) family factors. An examination of these results is provided in the following sections.

Category One: Why students perceived they had been unsuccessful in past attempts at college

Negative academic experiences.

Many students described being told by significant others that they were not "college material," or "didn't have what it takes" to attend college. Some students were plagued with self

doubt and "didn't think [they were] smart enough" to be successful college students. One student stated that she had to learn how to "stop thinking of herself as a failure" because of multiple past attempts at enrollment.

Several students stated that they "felt lost in the crowd" and "overwhelmed" at previous large universities. One student felt that "at my previous institution, teachers and advisors didn't care about students" and another "dreaded the inconvenience of application and registration." Students who had enrolled in several institutions seemed to seek out higher educational settings which were a better fit with their personal and academic needs. Some students reported their college choice did not match their academic or career interests, and several students stopped out of school due to choosing "a major which didn't fit." One student wrote that she "chose the wrong major due to family pressures and didn't listen to myself."

Perceived lack of academic skills.

Students felt they "never learned how to study," "relied too much on friends' notes," or "never took time to get help outside of class." Some students experienced extreme test anxiety, had problems with procrastination, and lacked necessary organizational skills. One student wrote that being "disorganized, a lack of sleep, not realizing that academics can be fun" contributed to stopping out during prior college attempts.

Lack of purpose and direction.

Students reported that during prior enrollments, they "did not take academics seriously." Others "looked at school as a social setting rather than a learning environment" and "partied too much." One student athlete who had attended multiple institutions wrote: "Sports didn't give me a chance to set any real goals. Grades were given to me and I never set any goals because I didn't have to do anything. I went to college and slipped through. It finally caught up with me."

Participants also reported a lack of direction, priorities, and focus as reasons for stopping out of college. One student reported that in attending college and choosing a major she formerly "allowed outside influences to guide my life" and needed time off to learn how to take back this control. Others felt that balancing school, work, spirituality, and family helped them realize that "now that I am older and wiser, I realize what is important." They "needed time off to prioritize [their] lives."

Family factors.

Family influences were also a major reason for stopping out of college. Several students reported stopping out due to a difficult pregnancy or childbirth. Others did not return due to family responsibilities: "I had to put school on the side in order to fulfill responsibilities that it might hurt in the short term"; "I have been raising an autistic son alone since 1989. I did what I thought was necessary to keep my children happy"; "I had to take care of my kids-my eldest is disabled- always going to doctors"; "Dropped out two times due to hypoglycemia and caring for my dying grandfather." Both male and female students reported that marriage or family responsibilities presented obstacles to their return to college.

Other students described a lack of emotional support as a significant factor in stopping out. Several students reported that their significant others and families were strongly opposed to their pursuit of academic goals: "My husband wanted a housewife, and I wanted a career. This continues to be a problem." "My abusive ex-husband lowered my self esteem." Relationship problems and divorce contributed to both stopping out of and returning to college as well: "I am just divorced—I now decided to think about myself and my kids. Before when married I didn't have that opportunity"; "After my divorce- I have changed now, it made me grow up and mature in a way I never thought I could. It helped me to focus on a new life."

Financial concerns.

Money was also a major concern for the students. Students often said they needed employment at one or more jobs or work longer hours, which interfered with going to school. It became a difficult choice between meeting "a short-term financial situation and [having] long-term security." For many of these students, having "enough time to pay the bills, rent, and car note" left little opportunity for school obligations. One student reported waiting until she had "greater job flexibility and tuition reimbursement" to return to school. Another was reluctant to apply for financial aid. Finally, a student wrote that her current financial obligations actually contributed to her motivation to return: "My parents were paying for everything previously. Now I am paying for it and it means more."

Category Two: Why students chose this time in their lives to return to school

New sense of self-awareness.

Based upon their experiences, several students returned to college because they believe that a college degree will provide them with a sense of independence, so they "won't have to depend on anyone or anything;" it is "the one thing no one can ever take away from me." Other responses in this area included: "I am the typical modern woman ready to get my life rolling forward" and "I want to get college behind me quickly so I can start my own life." According to these students' perspectives, they do not feel they can take ownership of their lives unless they attain a college degree.

Many participants stated that they had returned to school at this time due to a re-evaluation of their goals and plans and were "older, wiser, and more mature;" "I dropped out 15 years ago, but I am now older and wiser and know what I want." "I always felt I was too old or it was too late, but I finally decided it's now or never." Students felt they had learned from

mistakes they had made in the past, redefined their life direction, and viewed themselves as better able to cope with the demands of college because they knew what to expect. "It's time for me to get my life straight. I took some time off to find direction. I've learned a lot from the mistakes I made in the past." Students seem to feel that it is because of (rather than in spite of) their past experiences at multiple institutions they are now able to fully appreciate what is needed to achieve their academic goals. One student described her college enrollments as strengths: "I already attended three other colleges so I have a good head start on achieving my degree." Instead of being discouraged by multiple stops and starts in attendance, this student viewed each attempt as a building block towards degree completion.

Further, students returned to college to add meaning to their lives: "I feel like I am somebody when I am in college. . . school keeps the life inside me alive." "Something is missing from my job—I want more meaning in my life." A male student who wants to pursue a career in nursing decided: "I have taken from my parents and grandparents for personal satisfaction- I am now in college to give meaning to my life. I have taken and now I feel the need to give in kind."

Career and financial issues.

Students desired to return to college as a way to prepare for a better future through career advancement. Two students wrote they were advancing skills while waiting for acceptance into medical school. One student had "a night job, and I want to advance and get a day job so I can spend more time with my kids." Another student felt pressured to complete a degree in that her profession "is almost forcing me to update my skills and finish my degree." Students felt strongly about finding careers so that they would not be "stuck in minimum wage jobs." They desired a career rather than a series of jobs, and the job flexibility which may accompany this advancement: "I want job security, more freedom, time to have a career, not just a job."

Students also desired financial security and the ability to earn more money. One student reported being in school due to "finances—money means freedom and without money we are all slaves." Students seemed to recognize the value of a college degree in today's economy: "I've leaned now that working hard in this society is just working hard. You need an education to earn a living for yourself and your family." "The only way to have a decent future and still have a family is a college degree." They perceive that despite short-term financial hardships, college attendance will provide them with the financial security they seek. Two students described financial opportunities, including state tuition reimbursement and vocational rehabilitation, as facilitating their return to college at the present time.

Family issues.

A final dimension drawn from student reflections was the influence of family. Several students commented upon commitments made to family members as a reason for returning to school, including: "I made a promise to my mother" and "My parents didn't go to college, and I want to do this for them." Other students described their family circumstances as presenting an opportunity to return to school at the present time. Students with infants, school-age dependents, and adult children all commented upon the opportunities their families provide them in returning to college. "I've been married for 5 years, have a 3-year old daughter and 10 month old son- I've got the most important things done and now its time for the rest of my life to start"; "At my age I do not have the distractions that other people have and am able to be more disciplined"; "My kids are in school now- we can go to school together and help each other out." Some students commented that being divorced provided them with more time to devote to school, since they felt free to focus upon their own needs rather than those of their spouses.

Of the many male and female participants with dependents, most described their children as being the reason they returned to college. Instead of viewing their children's care as an obstacle to their education, they viewed it as an asset, a constant reminder of the need to persist in their pursuit of an academic goal. Many reported an unexpected pregnancy as a factor in stopping out of school, yet they also felt that having the child gave them an important reason to return to school. "I got pregnant and dropped out, but my daughter changed my life. Every decision I make affects her"; "At age 18 I was an undecided major, wasn't mature enough. At age 24 I had a boy, and I am in school now for my little boy's well-being." Another student viewed raising her children as both an obstacle and a strength in returning to school: "Being a single parent for almost 12 years has not been easy, but boy has it made me organized and responsible!"

Many students wrote about returning to college to serve as role models for their children so they would recognize the value of higher education. This desire was described in the following responses: "Because I went back to school, my sons will see the need for an education and the difficulty of delay in education." "I want to be an example for my two sons-ages 15 and 13." Students also wanted their children to view their parent's return to college as a sacrifice for their well being: "This is part of dues paid in order to provide for my family. It will be an example of my devotion to them"; "I am in school now because I want my daughter to be a strong and independent woman who looks up to me and appreciates what I've done."

Limitations

As with any type of single-institution study, generalizability of these findings is limited. Institutional size, affiliation, academic program offerings, and geography may all affect the responses given by the students that we labeled as tenacious persisters. In addition, since the

majority of participants were Caucasian women, a more heterogeneous and representative sample should be included in future research. A further limitation is our reliance on self-reporting of student enrollment history – we risk faulty recollections of college attendence and revisionist histories of reasons for departure. Finally, our study is limited in that we do not know if the students in this sample were successful in completing course requirements during the semester in which the study was conducted (including the orientation course that provided our sample), nor whether they continued their enrollment in college after the semester of our survey. Making this determination, however, would require tracking students' enrollment patterns over time, thus duplicating the problems with traditional studies of persistence that we attempted to avoid with our approach.

Implications

We found few surprises in why the students in our sample left college and why they returned. Their responses certainly fit with existing models of student persistence. It is important to note, however, that the reasons students gave for why they were currently in college were quite similar to why they stopped out of college in the first place. Horn and Carroll (1998) suggest that being older, working full-time, attending school part-time, and having distracting financial and family obligations are all factors linked to student departure. The participants in this research echoed this conclusion with their stories of stopping out of college and leaving previous institutions. But these tenacious persisters believed that they had learned from past academic experiences and personal difficulties; they had transformed former obstacles into strengths. Students who left college for financial reasons, for example, reported a new found conviction that their financial situation would only improve with a college degree. They used their continued frustrations regarding money as a reminder of the importance of this goal.

Similarly, those students who left because of the demands of childrearing later returned to serve as role models for their children. In other words, prior stressors – being older, divorced, having children, financial difficulties, negative academic experiences, lack of direction – were now viewed as motivating forces, urging students on towards continued enrollment.

By standard definitions, these students remain at-risk of leaving college yet again. As Quinnan (1997) points out, though, this "at-risk" label reflects certain assumptions we make about how students ought to attend higher education. It is certainly efficient to stay on the traditional persistence track (Carroll, 1989), whereby a student graduates from high school, immediately enters college, and stays enrolled full-time until graduation four years later. However, these students did not do that. Most students, in fact, do not (Adelman, 1999; Carroll, 1989; Levine & Cureton, 1998). While juggling work, family, and academic commitments may be detrimental to staying on the persistence track, these student experiences can also contribute to a different strand of persistence, one we have termed "tenacity." Instead of thinking of these students as being an "at-risk" population, perhaps it would be more profitable to consider them to be tenacious persisters and think of their attendence patterns as expected, not exceptional. In fact, tenacious persisters may represent a significant population in many colleges and universities.

Our study further suggests that differences between persisters and non-persisters may not be so easily delineated. Tenacious persisters, such as we described in our study, may stop out of college frequently, being counted by administrators and researchers as non-persisters. At any semester, however, the "non-persister" can prove the experts wrong and re-enroll in higher education. The reasons why these students leave and why they subsequently return seem to provide few clues for researchers in predicting future enrollment. Will child care difficulties again cause them to rethink their commitment to college? Will financial concerns overwhelm

their ability to fund their current enrollment? Will a lack of emotional support from significant others erode their belief that they will one day achieve their academic goals? Will their motivation sag as the academic workload increases? Or will they continue to be inspired by the possibility of earning a degree, and maintain their current enrollment until they reach their goal?

Only certain longitudinal studies conducted by the Department of Education (Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study, National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, High School and Beyond, and the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988) have had the potential to identify and follow tenacious persisters to help answer these questions. Future research should use these data sets to critically examine notions of non-persistence in higher education, and the role of tenacity as a distinguishing characteristic of non-traditional enrollment patterns. As lifelong learning becomes standard practice, we must always be open to the possibility that yesterday's drop-out may be today's tenacious persister.

In conclusion, tenacious persisters, as we have defined them, are not well represented in the literature on student persistence. Few of the students in this study, in fact, could have been classified as having persisted given typical strategies and timeframes for measuring student enrollment patterns. The findings from our study suggest that a simpler data collection procedure provides a way for these tenacious persisters to be recognized, thus providing valuable information about the obstacles that had blocked their continued attendance and the factors which contributed to their tenacity.

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Tables

Table One

Number of Attempted Semesters (N = 63)

0-1	2-3	4-5	6-7	8-9	10-13
0 (0%)	17 (27.0%)	13 (20.6%)	12 (19.0%)	14 (22.2%)	7 (11.1%)

Table Two

Number of Years Since Last Attendance (N = 63)

0-1	2-3	4-5	6-7	8-9	10-13	16
35 (55.5%)	11 (17.5%)	6 (9.5%)	1 (1.6%)	5 (7.9%)	4 (6.3%)	1 (1.6%)

Table Three

Number of Institutions Attended (N = 63)

2	3	4	5	6
40 (63.4%)	17 (27.0%)	5 (7.9%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.6%)

Table Four

Year of First College Enrollment (N = 63)

1973-80	1981-85	1986-90	1991-95	1996-00
2 (3.2%)	2 (3.2%)	9 (14.3%)	26 (41.3%)	24 (38.1%)